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AUTHOR Drucker, Howard; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Discrimination is discussed as it applies to the exclusion of racial minorities in classes for children with learning disabilities. The authors contend that this type of racial discrimination is prevalent nationwide (as illustrated by results of a national survey), and that the definition of learning disabilities and how it is operationalized has led to the unbalanced situation. (Author/SB)

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LEARNING DISABILITY AND ETHNIC MINORITY DISCRIMINATION

DR. HOWARD DRUCKER
DR. LINDA PARKER
MS. ELLEN THOMPSON
MS. AVAITA BURNS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The discrimination referred to in this article applies to the exclusion of racial minorities in classes for children with learning disabilities. The authors contend that this racial discrimination is prevalent nationwide, and that the definition itself has resulted in the unbalanced situation. Suggestions for change are presented.

Regardless of the term we use to label a child with educational problems, the effective determination of how that child is to be educated, or if the child is to be included into an educational program will depend on the definition of the label and how the definition is operationalized in practical day-to-day usage. One common definition used today is the one that surrounds children with learning disabilities. The current definition reads:

> Children with special learning disabilities exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language. These may be manifested in disorders of listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing, spelling or arithmetic. They include conditions which have been referred to as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, developmental aphasia, etc. They do not include learning problems which are due primarily to visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance or to environmental disadvantage. (Minimal Brain Dysfunction in Children, 1969.)

Dr. Drucker, formerly an assistant professor at the University of South Carolina, is presently Director of Special Education, San Luis Obispo County Office of Education, California.

Dr. Parker is currently Assistant Professor, Program for Exceptional Children, at the University of South Carolina.

Ms. E. Thompson is principal-teacher of the Withers School for Handicapped Children, Richland District #1, Columbia, South Carolina.

Ms. A. Burns was a graduate student in the Program for Exceptional Children at the University of South Carolina.

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Cruickshank speaking at the University of Michigan's Conference on Learning Disabilities stated that the present definition was "a definition of exclusion." McGannan (1974); also Hammill (1974) stated "Unfortunately, the definition is cluttered with so many ambiguous words and phrases that its interpretation would perplex a Philadelphia lawyer." (1974)

One of the indications of confusion in the interpretation of the definition was the observed discrepancy in the black-white rations in L.D. classes as compared to the E.M.R. classes. This phenomenon was observed directly by the senior author and was reported by Franks (1971) concerning the state of Missouri, and most recently by Burke (1975). Franks found that on the average, "Afro-American children in E.M.R. classes was 34.21 percent....The percentage of Afro-American children in L.D. classes was 3.22 percent...." (Franks 1971).

In addition, Burke (1975) reported that in "an established suburban community of a northern city...." a statistically significant discrepancy was found"....Because more black children than expected were observed in educable mentally handicapped rooms, while more white children than expected were observed in learning disability rooms."

In order to obtain additional data, a nationwide questionnaire was sent out to all state directors of special education in the United States. The directors were requested to report the percentages of black-white and other children in their E.M.R. and L.D. classes. Three replies could be used out of the fifty inquiries sent. The data is reviewed below in Table 1.

TABLE 1

RESULTS OF SURVEY

	Total State School Population	EMH	LD
State #1			
White	73.0%	42.9%	63.2%
Black	25.9%	56.3%	35.9%
Other	1.1%	.8%	.9%
State #2			
White	77.7%	56.1%	77.8%
Black	16.0%	36.2%	17.1%
Other	6.3%	7.7%	5.1%
State #3			
White	71.0%	39.1%	53.2%
Black	23.0%	60.9%	46.8%
Other	6.0%	None Given	None Given

Obviously one cannot state nationwide trends from such a small sample, however, the data did lend some support for Frank and Burke's findings.

Implications

Franks (1971) did not infer as to the causes of imbalance in racial mixtures in the two classes. However, the present authors are of the belief that the factors causing the imbalance lies in the definition itself and in the day-to-day operationalizing. The issue at point lies in the last sentence of the definition which states:

> They do not include learning problems which are due primarily to visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance or to environmental disadvantage. (Minimal brain dysfunction in children 1969)

It is the belief of the authors that the exclusion of mentally retarded and environmentally disadvantaged children from consideration eliminates racial minorities.

The operation of Learning Disability Programs has also contributed to the apparent imbalance by requiring intelligence testing as a procedure for identifying those children who are of normal or potentially normal intelligence.

The IQ test used by psychologists are, to a large extent anglocentric. They tend to measure the extent to which an individual's background is similar to that of the cultural configuration of Anglo Middle-class society, and are not as valid for Black populations. (Williams 1974)

A bright spot on the horizon was noted seen when Cruickshank reported that "a new definition....of inclusion rather than exclusion voids the concept of intellectual demarcation, " (McGlannan 1975) is forthcoming; also imperative is that states adopt a more satisfactory definition and modify screening and placement practices.

Unless this is done, Learning Disabilities will be as stigmatized as a disorder of the affluent white, and therefore, subject itself to pointed, justified, criticism by minorities; withdrawal of federal support and professional abandonment.

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